

Hippias Major - A Structural Analysis

1. The *Idea*

To *agathon* (the Good) is to *prepon* (the Fitting), and to *kalon* (the Beautiful/Fine) is to *phainomenon prepon* (the apparent Fitting).

2. The *Eidos*

All good things are fitting in some way. We do not have immediate acquaintance with fitting things. The good, therefore, is always mediated to us as beauty or the fine. Things look good, sound good, or are understood to be good. In other words, there is fittingness which may be sensed and fittingness which may be intelligized.

In addition, the Many make the category mistake of confusing sensed fittingness with intelligized fittingness, assuming, for example, that a good-looking person is thereby beneficial. Apparent fittingness, therefore, is meaningfully divided, for the purposes of dramatizing misconstrual, into fittingness grasped by *nous* and fittingness not grasped by *nous*.

3. The *Paradeigma*

The best representative of apparent fittingness is the apparent expert at appearing fitting, and this is the Sophist, highly trained in persuasion and in the subversion of logic (achieved through rhetoric and eristics respectively). For the sake of the demonstration, he is as expert as it is possible to be in appearing fitting in every way to the Many. This does not include intelligized fittingness, since the Many lack *nous*.

The Many assume that sensed or opined fittingness indicates something beneficial. The Sophist, therefore, represents the misconstrual of sensed and opined fittingness as the Beneficial. Sensed and opined unfittingness, misconstrued by the *nous*-less Many to be worthless or harmful, is represented by the Dialectician.

The only concern of the Dialectician is to be practically fitting. The Dialectician intelligizes fittingness and represents intelligized fittingness, being beneficial.

4. The *Deigma*

The Sophist is Hippias of Elis, the same character who appears in *Hippias Minor*. There he represented technical ability whose end is the appearance of good. In this dialogue, evidently written somewhat later, ability is only one of the facets of apparent fittingness.

The Dialectician is Socrates, who remains a figure whose technical ability is unrecognized, and to whom aesthetic and social unfittingness have been added.

5. The Conversation

Hippias is concerned solely with appearing fitting in every way to his immediate audience. It is the task of Socrates to cause Hippias to introspect. How does Hippias appear to himself? How can he appear fitting to himself when his whole persona is revealed as a mirage of shifting positions, attuned only to the position he believes his audience to hold at any given moment?

His problem - or opportunity - is that the present audience is a Dialectician and not one of the Many. Socrates sets up one criterion of apparent fittingness only to contrast it later with an opposing criterion. Hippias should therefore consider himself apparently unfitting by at least one of these criteria, or at least realize that he has failed to appear fitting in every way and at all times to his immediate audience.

It is not Socrates' intention to make Hippias conclude that he appears unfitting. There is nothing wrong with appearing unfitting, as Socrates himself demonstrates. What Socrates wants is to help Hippias recognize the error of his ways: appearing fitting is a poor substitute for being fitting in the practical sphere. In fact, the determined effort to appear beneficial is not merely fruitless but actually harmful, since the process requires keeping the Many in a state of confusion and destroying whatever logical or critical thinking they may have possessed before encountering Hippias and his sophistry.